

Editorial

Between February 17 and 25, 2000, China and the United States both published lengthy documents exploring the situation of human rights in China. China's Information Office of the State Council issued the white paper, "Fifty Years of Progress on China's Human Rights," and The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the U.S. State Department released "1999 Country Reports of Human Rights Practices." If inhabitants of some far off planet suddenly came upon these two documents, they would be hard put to know that both deal with the same place and in the same year.

China's white paper is a self-congratulatory piece of some 15,000 words, announcing that China's human rights record has never been so good. The paper looks to the past to demonstrate its progress of human rights over the last 50 years. It boasts that the Chinese now enjoy "unprecedented freedom and democracy." In "old semi-colonial, semi-feudal China, the broad masses were oppressed by imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, and had no human rights at all." It was only, according to the paper, after 1949 with the founding of the new China, that "a new epoch was started for the progress of human rights in China."

The second part of the paper reiterates that China's top priority remains feeding its 1.3 billion people. This is more important, it says, than any Western carping against China's human rights record. China cites its tremendous improvement in development, economics, social and cultural rights. The third section deals with China's civil and political rights. "All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people." It proudly announces that "99.97 per cent of China's citizens aged 18 or above enjoy the right to vote and to stand for election...Every region, ethnic group has its proportion of representatives in the people's congresses at all levels."

The three remaining sections deal with the "Protection of the Rights of Women and Children," "Equal Rights and Special Protection for Ethnic Minorities," and finally, "The Cross-Century Development Prospects for Human Rights in China." In this last section, China admits that, although a great deal has been accomplished, there is still room for improvement. In noting its tremendous economic development, it asserts that "building socialism with Chinese characteristics is a road of development that is in accordance with the

fundamental interests of the Chinese people, and also the only road which can effectively promote human rights in China.”

China looks forward to the 21st century with hope, “We have every reason to believe that as long as we follow the plans laid down at the Party’s Fifteenth National Congress, governing the country according to law, and strive to build a socialist country ruled by law, China’s human rights situation will see steady improvement.”

The U.S. document, however, is of the opinion that the human rights situation in China has deteriorated considerably during the last year. It sets out to prove this in a 71-page report, which faults the Chinese government for its “intensified efforts to suppress dissent, particularly organized dissent.” It illustrates this by pointing out that the key leaders of the China Democracy Party (CDP) are serving long prison terms, Falun Gong members are also in jail or in re-education camps. It cites extrajudicial killings, torture, and mistreatment of prisoners, forced confessions, arbitrary arrests and detention. It goes on to stress the restrictions on freedom of movement and violence against women, child labor, and coercive family planning practices. The list is almost endless. It cites that “serious human rights abuses persist in some minority areas, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang where restrictions on religion and other fundamental freedoms intensified.”

Here, we are interested in analyzing briefly the differences in the two papers relative to the freedom of religion.

China’s white paper starts its section on freedom of religious belief by stating that the State protects the freedom of religious belief and the normal religious activities of its citizens. It then cites Article 36 of the Constitution that guarantees that right. To prove the progress that has been made in this area, China cites some impressive statistics: China has more than 100 million religious believers, 85,000 venues for religious activities that have been registered, and some 300,000 professional religious personnel. Religious organizations have contacts in more than 70 countries and regions. Even the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference include people with religious beliefs. In addition, more than 17,000 religious personnel have been elected as deputies to the people’s congresses and deputies of the people’s political consultative conferences at various levels.

The U.S. State Department report affirms that unapproved religious groups, both Protestant and Catholics, continued to experi-

ence interference, repression, and persecution in varying degrees. It admits that the treatment varies considerably from one region to another, but it deplores the crackdown on the unregistered Catholic church and Protestant house churches, and singles out the Falun Gong practitioners who had at least 35,000 confrontations with police between the months of July and October, 1999. The report estimates that several thousand are detained for peacefully expressing their political, religious, or social views; but China maintains that they have been detained not for their religious views but for violating the law.

The U.S. State Department's statistics indicate that China has chosen to ignore the large and ever-growing number of believers in the unregistered churches. The number of believers is, therefore, considerably higher than any government estimates.

The U.S. report cites specific examples of restrictions, and arrests by giving the names of bishops and priests who are under some kind of detention. It also cites the areas in the country where the greatest amount of repression has been taking place, and describes the various forms of repression inflicted on those who choose not to register their places of worship.

For some reason, which is not entirely clear, the U.S. report repeats data from years preceding 1999. This is perhaps by way of emphasizing that the same abuses are of long standing. The report does say, to China's credit, that more than 22 million Bibles are presently in print and these have even been published in Braille, and a number of minority dialects.

There is no doubt whatsoever that religious belief and the ever-increasing number of believers pose a threat to Chinese authorities. This fear leads to an increase in surveillance and the desire to control. Excessive control leads to repression and repression leads to censure by outside sources. This in turn tends to make China react negatively, construing such criticism as interference in its internal affairs. But if China wants to be a real player on the world stage, it will have to set its fear aside, and believe that people respond to freedom with responsibility.

But is it not also legitimate to ask whether the US should not examine its own conscience and openly deplore the abuses of human rights taking place within its own borders?